

The Speech Community

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This article will appear in JK Chambers, P Trudgill & N Schilling-Estes (eds.), *Handbook of language variation and change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

ABSTRACT: The speech community (SpCom), a core concept in empirical linguistics, is at the intersection of many principal problems in sociolinguistic theory and method. This paper traces its history of development and divergence, surveys general problems with contemporary notions, and discusses links to key issues in investigating language variation and change. It neither offers a new and correct definition nor rejects the concept (both are seen as misguided efforts), nor does it exhaustively survey the applications in the field (an impossibly large task).

General Problems with the Speech Community

Every branch of linguistics that is concerned with representative samples of a population; that takes individual speakers or experimental subjects as typical members of a group; that studies *langue* as attributable to a socially coherent body (whether or not it professes interest in the social nature of that body); or that takes as primitive such notions as 'native speaker', 'competence/performance', 'acceptability', etc., which manifestly refer to collective behavior, rests partially on a concept equivalent to the SpCom. Linguistic systems are exercised by speakers, in social space: there they are acquired, change, are manipulated for expressive or communicative purposes, undergo attrition, etc. Whether linguists prefer to focus on speakers, varieties or grammars, the problem of relating a linguistic system to its speakers is not trivial.

In studying language change and variation (geographical or social) it is inescapable, yet there is remarkably little agreement or theoretical discussion of the concept in sociolinguistics, though it is much defined. Some examples from research reports suggest the degree of its (over-)extension (Williams 1992, p.71).

The term 'SpCom' has been used for geographically bounded urban communities large (Philadelphia; Labov 1989) and small (Anniston, Alabama; Feagin 1996); for urban neighborhoods ('Veeton' in Kingston, Jamaica; Patrick 1999) and subgroups: Belfast vernacular

speakers (Milroy & Margrain 1980 – but see Macaulay 1997, p.15) and “the French-speaking minority of Ontario, Canada” (Mougeon & Beniak 1996, p.69). It has been denied to other cities (London; Wardhaugh 1998, p.123), but used for Anglo-Saxon England (Labov 1982, p.35); for urban immigrants, as distinct from both their source and target groups (Kerswill 1994); and for the “national unity of a people” (Dittmar 1976, p.106). Cutting across geographic and class lines, it has been used of very general assemblages such as children (Romaine 1982, p.7) and women (Coates 1993, p.140), as well as specific and temporary ones such as members of a jury (Durant 1999).

For rural populations, it has been used to pick out named settlements of Warlpiri speakers (Bavin 1989), but for both individual locality and a discontinuous, larger region – the Gaeltacht – in Ireland (Watson 1989), where speakers do not define their communities in linguistic terms. Joly (1981) calls the Afro-Hispanic population of Panama’s Costa Abajo both a SpCom and a ‘ritual community’. Dimmendaal uses SpCom for the Turkana in Kenya, who have absorbed a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups (with consequent language loss) and undergone significant dialect differentiation (1989). The famously complex case of Eastern Tukanan language speakers in the Vaupés region of Amazonia, where each patrilineal exogamic group is ideally identified by language but “one does not marry someone who speaks one’s own language” (Gomez-Imbert 1996, p.442), is analyzed as a SpCom by Jackson (1974, p.55) but not Gomez-Imbert.

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In textbooks the SpCom is ignored surprisingly often (Chambers and Trudgill 1980, Chambers 1995, Downes 1998, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998, Trudgill 2000). Elsewhere it is considered too difficult to explore (Fasold 1984, p.44), or treated narrowly within a single paradigm, usually ethnographic (Fasold 1990, Romaine 1994, Salzmann 1998); with contrasting approaches briefly outlined but not pursued.

Occasionally the SpCom is seriously treated, but with no positive resolution of difficulties. Hudson (1996) compares several major definitions but, starting from the premise that language is an individual possession, takes a radical subjectivist view that ends by entirely dismissing the utility of the concept. Wardhaugh (1998) similarly develops the idea from idealized homogeneity to fragmented individualism, with community dependent upon the impulse to identify oneself with others. Instead of rejection he prefers a vague, one-size-fits-all approach: "some kind of social group whose speech characteristics are of interest and can be described in a coherent manner" (1998, p.116). More helpfully, but equally radically, Duranti recommends abandoning the SpCom as "an already constituted object of inquiry", instead taking it as an analytical perspective: "the product of the communicative activities engaged in by a given group of people" (1997, p.82). Despite this trend towards rejection, the SpCom is still referred to by most researchers as though it were either unproblematic or, at any rate, necessary.

This partial review suggests a general lack of analysis and synthesis concerning the SpCom; the next section considers more thoughtful treatments. Reading the history of this concept, one is struck by the programmatic character of the chief sociolinguistic definitions. Many influential ones were advanced early in the field's development – formulated in the 1960s and refined in the 1970s – perhaps as signposts staking out territories their proponents wished to pursue. Based on a few early studies (e.g. Labov in NYC, Gumperz in India), they reflect concerns of each researcher – multilingualism for Gumperz, linguistic evaluation and style-shifting for Labov, ways of speaking and communicative competence for Hymes – to the relative exclusion of other emphases. As practitioners developing an idea for use in their own projects, each created a contingent concept, later retooled for general use.

This hindsight view exaggerates: convergences did occur, notably between Hymes and Gumperz. Yet introducing each new conception one finds little or no reference to existing ones: Gumperz is not concerned with stratification, or Labov with shared communicative patterns across language areas, while Hymes discusses interactional criteria only with reference to Bloomfield, not Gumperz. Clearly definitions were not developed on the basis of any taxonomy of case studies or survey of existing work.

Despite general early concern for classification of sociolinguistic situations (Weinreich 1953, Ferguson 1959, 1966, Stewart 1962, Hymes 1972), and Hymes's statement that "The natural unit for

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sociolinguistic taxonomy... is not the language but the speech community" (p.43), apparently no such enterprise has formed the basis for examination and empirical development of the speech community concept. Indeed, the taxonomic enterprise itself has languished or perhaps been abandoned: we have nothing equivalent to anthropology's cross-cultural Human Relations Area Files. Though comparative studies flourish in specific areas (urban dialectology, dialect contact, language attrition), overall profiles and general models are lacking: attempts to analyze speech communities holistically as sociolinguistic systems, and then typologize them (Trudgill 2001).

A good deal of theorizing in a young, expanding field is polemical in nature. Common external targets have been structuralists' reduction of the speech community to mere extension of a linguistic system (Hymes 1972, p.54), and Chomsky's famous "ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community" (1965, p.3). Within the field, Labov's (1966) definition has been repeatedly attacked, often by researchers with similar methodological and analytical predilections.

Such efforts typically identify overly broad claims or narrow restrictions in the original by introducing new data, and sometimes innovative methods. Often they over- or misinterpret earlier ideas, maximizing their unfashionability in the light of recent changes in direction, anchoring a predecessor's general insight implausibly to specific associated elements as if to threaten the whole enterprise, which can then be saved by adopting their innovation. The historical

account below attempts to sever spurious attachments, in order to enhance our vision both backwards and forwards.

Another polemical tactic is to claim that sociolinguistic research paradigms are efficiently encapsulated by their definitions of the SpCom, which serve as proximate targets. If the view sketched here of the concept's development is correct, such brief declarations make only partial, often early or shifting, statements of their associated approaches' basic principles. To this extent, radical attacks (or, equally, promotions) miss their mark unless they look to practice as well as prose.

As the sociolinguistic research base massively expands, and the oppositional influence of theory groups and founders' ideas (Murray 1996, Figueroa 1994) perhaps begins to recede, discussion of the SpCom shifts away from the polemics of paradigm wars, towards cooler engagement with relatively abstract major issues (but see Bucholtz 1999, a recent attempt to supplant SpCom with "community of practice"). One that has received considerable attention is the problem of appropriate social models: the consensus-vs.-conflict debate, stratification and social class. Two others are not always carefully distinguished and sometimes misguidedly opposed: the problems of correlation (linking linguistic behavior to social position/structure) and indexicality (explaining how linguistic forms index social meaning). These are related to an emphasis on linguistic and normative uniformity vs. subjective identification, and a choice of focus on institutional power vs. individual agency – and thus to

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another issue: scale, the size of group studied and its influence on assumptions, methods and interpretation. These are not new problems for sociolinguistics, but their interrelationship and connection to the SpCom needs clarification.

On ground more familiar to general linguists, if equally uncertain, two claims critically underlie classic definitions: the uniformity of speech by different speakers, on distinct occasions; and the possibility of identifying a group of speakers who share a single language (or conversely, identifying the boundaries of a language, as spoken by individuals). Notions of competence, nativeness, and language boundaries are too basic and problematic to address here, but the SpCom represents no escape from them.

Yet more fundamental issues loom. What precisely is the status of the equation between shared linguistic knowledge and social membership, which most definitions raise? In referring to the SpCom, are (socio-)linguists assuming that speakers united by linguistic criteria form a social group? Is this axiomatic? Are we instead hypothesizing, nominating this as a research question which empirical studies will eventually answer? Is it further below awareness, an equation made primarily in method, with unexplored consequences for analysis and interpretation? Confusion on this point is rampant, with the same author sometimes implying different positions.

The SpCom is evidently fraught with difficulties. In mixing issues social and linguistic, matters of fact and philosophy, it brings us to the brink of issues many practicing sociolinguists feel uncomfortable with,

perhaps even unprepared to answer. For example, it is unclear whether the SpCom is primarily a social or linguistic object (or inhabits a ground where this distinction is unmotivated). Is it appropriate to build a model using linguistic matter, and then treat it on a par with concepts like social group, network, community of practice – purely social notions, in the definition of which language plays no role? Bucholtz portrays the SpCom as “a language-based unit of social analysis” (1999, p.203), and complains of the centrality of language, contending that “all non-linguistic aspects of social activity are marginalized or ignored” (p.207). For Hymes, however, the SpCom is not a naïve attempt to use language to compass a social unit, but rather “an object defined for purposes of linguistic inquiry”, not to be confused with “attributes of the counterpart of that object in social life... It postulates the unit of description as a social, rather than linguistic, entity” (1974, pp.48, 47).

Ultimately I adopt a similar view, turning around Bucholtz’s phrasing to see the SpCom as ‘a socially-based unit of linguistic analysis’, and advocate an approach which addresses the issues implied in current SpCom definitions as questions in formulating methodology and interpretations.

History of the Speech Community: Principal Theorists

Its roots lie in the general sources of sociolinguistics: historical linguistics, philosophy of language, dialectology, anthropology, early structuralism. Tracing “the Humboldtian (and Herderian) sources of

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[American] structural linguistics” (Hymes & Fought 1981, p.98) through Boas, Sapir and Whorf reveals a persistent link between community and language form. Hymes characterizes a “Herderian model of one language, one people, one culture, one community – the Hopi and their language, etc.” (1974, p.123), and describes what

“‘Cartesian’ and ‘Herderian’ approaches... have fundamentally in common: isolation of a language as the object of linguistic description; equation of a language with a speech community (or culture); taking of the social functions of language as external, given, and universally equivalent” (p.120).

Von Humboldt thought we must “seek the basic explanation of our present-day cultural level in... national intellectual individualities... Since they [languages] always have a national form, nations as such are really and directly creative” (1971, p.20; see Aarsleff 1982 against the Herder-via-Humboldt lineage).

Boas and his students more cautiously represent the bond as complex and note merely, “all languages reflect the history and culture... of the community of which they have been a part” (Hymes & Fought 1981, p.81). Likewise Sapir, whose Master’s thesis investigated Herder’s influence on von Humboldt: “Speech... is a purely historical heritage of the group, the product of long-continued social usage” (1921, p.4). After Boas, he argues early and influentially against biological determinism, the linkage of language change and origins with the progress and genius of nations and races: “Language, race and culture are not necessarily correlated... The coincidences of

cleavage point merely to a readily intelligible historical association” (pp.215–216). He grants no simple corporate identity to the speakers of a language variety, and appears not to use a specific term like SpCom.

Hymes embraces a basic idea of the ‘Herderian’ approach: “emphasis on language as constituting cultural identity... a methodology of sympathetic interpretation of cultural diversity *sui generis* – Herder coined the German verb *einfehlen* – if within a larger universal framework” (1974, p.120). (See Meyerhoff 2001; the last phrase affirms the possibility of taxonomy and comparison, contra Vico.) He cautions, “The focus, however, must be changed from a language as a correlate of a people, to persons and their ways of speaking” (p.123).

Other nineteenth-century historical linguists give the community’s role short shrift. Saussure speaks only in passing of a ‘community of speakers’ in the context of explanations for language change. For Whitney, individuals innovate but communities actually change languages by selecting among innovations: “Language is not an individual possession, but a social... The community... [is the] final tribunal which decides whether anything shall be language or not” (1979, pp.149–150). This position is held by Gauchat (1905; Weinreich, Labov & Herzog, 1968) and Sapir, in his discussion of drift (1921; Ferguson 1996). Further elaboration by historical linguists is slow arriving. Even in 1960 Martinet, observing “We must first of all attempt to define the notion of a linguistic community, if such a thing

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is possible” (1964, p.136), does so minimally. He notes variation within varieties, and alternation between them, but affirms straightforward extension of a language to a set of speakers: “Human beings who belong to one or more linguistic communities... use one or the other language according to the person addressed” (p.139).

This extension is the classic position, first explicitly adopted by Bloomfield (though Fishman thinks SpCom is “probably translated from the German *Sprachgemeinschaft*”, 1971a, p.232; Raith 1987). He locates it within the theoretical framework of his postulates (1926, pp.153–154):

“1. Definition. An act of speech is an utterance. 2. Assumption. Within certain communities successive utterances are alike or partly alike... 3. Definition. Any such community is a speech community.”

This formulation highlights the problem of linguistic uniformity (how alike must utterances be, and in what ways, to constitute their speakers as sharing a speech community?), smuggling in ‘community’ as an unquestioned prime – two problems that remain with us. A later, widely-read version emphasises that intelligibility governs the boundaries of SpComs – though since this is a continuum, “the term speech-community has only a relative value” (1933, p.54). By this criterion, “speech-communities differ greatly in size” (p.43), while bilinguals belong to disparate communities. Bloomfield also notes variation within single communities on geographic and social axes. He thus touches on problems of scale, overlapping communities, and normative heterogeneity.

Crucially, he explains both internal variation and external boundaries by interactional networks: “a speech–community is a group of people who interact by means of speech” (p.42). Gumperz attributes this to structuralist awareness of dialect geography findings: “By the mid 1930s... language change could thus be explained as a direct function of the amount and intensity of verbal interaction among speakers” (1982, p.23; but see Milroy & Milroy 1998). In this view, “differences of speech within a community are due to differences in density of communication” (Bloomfield 1933, p.46), while “sub–groups are separated by lines of weakness in this net of oral communication” (p.47). He includes social classes, age–groups and occupations; indeed this chapter, entitled “Speech–Communities,” is essentially a survey of extra–linguistic correlations. The discussion is primitive compared to later sociolinguists’ use of social network theory (beginning perhaps with Fishman 1971a); and social features are largely discounted as influences on linguistic structure, as issues of linguistic relativity are subsequently suppressed by universalists (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996). Yet Bloomfield’s emphasis on interaction, and his suggestion that its impact might be quantified, importantly prefigure work by Gumperz and the Milroys. The idea that networks are neutral and mechanical in effect remains critical.

In the early 1960s, sociolinguists elaborated the SpCom. Classic definitions were still being offered – “all the people who use a given language (or dialect)” (Lyons 1970, p.326) – but Gumperz in 1962 located the problem: “While the anthropologist’s description refers to

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specific communities, the universe of linguistic analysis is a single language or dialect, a body of verbal signs abstracted from the totality of communicative behavior” (1972, p.460). From the latter position many problems of language use are inaccessible; Gumperz was interested, among others, in language choice and codeswitching in multilingual settings. Weinreich (1953), bridging the gap between structural and functional approaches, introduced the notion of ‘bilingual speech community’ in opposition to extensions of the classic position such as Mackey’s (1972, p.554):

“An individual’s use of two languages supposes the existence of two different language communities; it does not suppose the existence of a bilingual community. The bilingual community can only be regarded as a dependent collection of individuals who have reasons for being bilingual.”

Gumperz, reformulating the SpCom “as a social group which may be either monolingual or multilingual”, adopts “the term ‘linguistic community’ by analogy with Emeneau’s term ‘linguistic area’” (1972, p.463) – pointing to work which demonstrated that social contact leads to extensive structural parallels across the boundaries not only of individual languages, but of language families (Emeneau 1956). However, Gumperz clearly did not intend to imply the traditional concept was adequate; in 1968 he revises the notion but returns to the name ‘SpCom’.

His approach is explicitly functional: “The criterion for inclusion of a code in a study of a linguistic community is that its exclusion will

produce a gap in the communication matrix” (1972, p.464). In this spirit he facilitates the taxonomic enterprise, recommending a typology of relationships “between the overall characteristics of the code matrix and certain features of social structure” (p.465), and developing a terminology (largely abandoned) to allow more general formulations.

Gumperz’s initial version of SpCom closely follows Bloomfield (1933) in its focus on the frequency of social interaction. Interestingly, Hymes later insists that frequency is not enough. Rather, he claims (citing Gumperz’s own findings), the “definition of situations in which, and identities through which, interaction occurs is decisive” (1974, p.47). Initially Gumperz, like Bloomfield, leaves open questions of scale: linguistic communities “may consist of small groups bound together by face-to-face contact or may cover large regions, depending on the level of abstraction we wish to achieve” (Gumperz 1972, p.463). Note his implication that social cohesion is optional; Hymes will not allow that “identity, or commonality, of linguistic knowledge” is sufficient to unify members of a community (1974, p.47).

In the 1968 revision, Gumperz introduces two elements absent from the previous definition (which depended entirely on social criteria). Both are shared with Labov and Hymes, and enormously influential in subsequent conceptions. He defines the SpCom as “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar

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aggregates by significant differences in language usage” (1968, p.381). This ‘shared body’ reintroduces common linguistic knowledge as a necessary criterion. He adds that “speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms” (1968, p.382); such normative regulation is also at the heart of Labov’s conception.

This pair of criteria alone satisfies many sociolinguists as an all-purpose definition. For Fishman (1971b, p.28), a SpCom is a subtype of community “all of whose members share at least a single speech variety and the norms for its appropriate use”. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1998, p.490) claim that though lip-service is usually paid to a Rules+Norms model (ironically credited to Gumperz 1982), sociolinguists “seldom recognize explicitly the crucial role of practice in delineating speech communities”. In such characterizations the interactional criterion is omitted. Fishman and many others reduce the Rules component to a minimum collective competence in grammatical knowledge. Kerswill, viewing Gumperz’s larger body of work, proposes a more complex interpretation of this ‘shared body’. He believes it refers not only to “linguistic similarities among the various codes in use”, but also to “agreement on the social meaning of various linguistic parameters” (1994, p.24), including sociolinguistic variables, codeswitching, and contextualization cues; such parameters can only be fully understood by members of the same SpCom. However, I separate shared grammatical competence as a criterion from organization and interpretation of sociolinguistic norms.

Gumperz's 1982 revision (p.24) expresses ideas shared with Hymes and Labov:

"A SpCom is defined in functionalist terms as a system of organized diversity held together by common norms and aspirations... Members of such a community typically vary with respect to certain beliefs and other aspects of behavior. Such variation, which seems irregular when observed at the level of the individual, nonetheless shows systematic regularities at the statistical level of social facts"

This definition sympathetically assimilates Labov's work into a broader social framework. Yet Gumperz makes clear that he is more interested in exploring how interaction, including language, constitutes social reality. From this perspective he seriously questions the applicability of the SpCom concept (p.26).

Classic definitions conceived it as a "linguistic distribution within a social or geographical space" (1972, p.463); some current models require "a geographical area delimited by non-linguistic criteria, such as demography or socio-political boundaries" (Kerwill 1994, p.23). Dialect geography and anthropology, too, have often assumed that the most local and insular units are somehow the purest and strongest, thus the canonical community. But Gumperz cites a worldwide weakening of social boundaries and deference to group norms, compelling attention to the processes by which individuals index identity. This requires a renewed focus on face-to-face interaction, ethnographic observation, and a consequent restriction to small-scale studies. In effect he first confines the speech community to quantitative, correlational work - rejecting the broad conception

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sought in earlier approaches – and then abandons (though does not dismiss) it as a research focus. This move is influential in current debates, where the divorce of the correlational and indexing enterprises assumes an appearance of historical inevitability.

That however is not Gumperz's current perspective. As part of a rejuvenated linguistic anthropological interest in social indexicality, he maintains his interest in face-to-face interaction (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996, p.11):

“If meaning resides in interpretive practices... located in the social networks one is socialized in, then the ‘culture-’ and ‘language-’ bearing units are not nations, ethnic groups or the like... but rather networks of interacting individuals.”

Such networks may “cross-cut linguistic and social boundaries of all sorts, creating regional and even global patterns of shared, similar communicative strategies in specialist networks” (p.12). In order to locate both local and extended networks, and to grapple with supra-local problems such as standard language ideologies, a familiar larger entity is required: “SpComs, broadly conceived, can be regarded as collectivities of social networks” (Gumperz 1996, p.362). On this view, the rehabilitated SpCom is not an abstract nexus of category lines, but rather composed of network building-blocks in which “interpretive strategies are embedded... and passed on as shared communicative traditions”. The difficulty with studying social meaning above the network level is that “indexicality reflect[s] network-specific practices” while SpComs “tend towards diversification and this restricts the

extent to which linguistic forms, conceptual structures, and culture are shared" (p.363). Thus a notion of SpCom persists but not one which presumes or requires unity of norms and ways of speaking. This notion inhabits an upper region of the scale, and must allow for nesting and interlocking network patterns.

This extended discussion of Gumperz's approaches to the SpCom has served to introduce many themes still current and problematic. One might have done the same via other theorists; Gumperz is convenient because his definitions are clear and easily dated in their progress, not subsumed early into a theoretical or methodological apparatus which promotes other concepts as more basic - as with Hymes and Labov. Consideration of their competing and complementary approaches will be contrastive as much as historical, but the progressive focusing of Gumperz's views raises a key question: Has the SpCom become restricted to certain (possibly incompatible) paradigms of sociolinguistics, or is a broad conception still viable? (Though indeed the idea began in particular contexts, early efforts all tended towards generalization.)

Dell Hymes has always maintained a broad notion of the SpCom rooted in his understanding of the sociolinguistic enterprise:

"SpCom is a necessary, primary concept... It postulates the unit of description as a social, rather than linguistic, entity. One starts with a social group and considers the entire organization of linguistic means within it." (1974, p.47)

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In many respects he and Gumperz agree: in shifting the classical focus from varieties to the relations among speakers, discarding on functional grounds the restriction to monolingual situations, promoting sociolinguistic taxonomy, and insisting on both shared grammar and shared norms. Where Gumperz's descriptions start from individuals (like social network theory and the community of practice approach), emphasizing speaker agency, boundary shifting and emergent meaning, ethnography of communication began with a concern for collective resources, bounded events and ritual performance, privileging community and structure – it focused on social meaning, but was not speaker-based.

In Hymes's theorizing, the nature of the SpCom is inferred from more basic terms: "The starting point of description is... a repertoire of ways of speaking... a speech community defined through the concurrence of rules of grammar and rules of use" (1974, p.120). It is not a methodological prime: one cannot know what practices are critical, or who shares in them, before study has been carried out. *Communicative competence*, *ways of speaking* (especially) and *verbal repertoire* are principal terms. (Privileging contexts and institutions as vantage point yields an alternative, more abstract approach, "the study of the speech economy of a community" (1974, p.46), pursued by e.g. Gal 1989, Irvine 1989, Silverstein 1996.) An ideal ethnographer of speaking identifies a verbal repertoire, catalogues speech events and rules of communicative practice, and describes what communicative competence consists in: the SpCom can then be defined as the set of

speakers who appropriately exploit these resources. As in the classic definition, SpCom members are an identifiable existing group located and bounded by shared knowledge – though Hymes stresses social knowledge of language functions and norms.

Knowledge of speechways, and ability, are unequally distributed within a community, however, raising the problem of how much knowledge is required (Dorian 1982); while knowledge alone is not sufficient to distinguish members from mere participants (e.g. experienced fieldworkers), as Hymes acknowledges (1974, pp.50–51). He allows wholly non-linguistic criteria here, such as birthright, reminding us that his conception presumes a cohesive entity, not just a set of interacting speakers – a stricter requirement than Gumperz’s loose interactional collectivity. Thus Hymes’s “socially constituted linguistics” (1974, p.196) looks to social material to constrain the ways in which language is encountered empirically. His SpCom is a socially-based unit of linguistic analysis, and he explicitly warns that sociolinguistics “requires the contribution of social science in characterising the notions of community, and of membership”. Pending this solution, however, he follows early Gumperz in specifying “a local unit, characterised for its members by common locality and primary interaction” (1974, p.51).

Yet from the start, Hymes’s approach emphasises shared norms over interaction. He restates Bloomfield’s fundamental principle of linguistic theory: “in a SpCom some utterances are the same”, in terms of normative information derived from speech events: “in a SpCom,

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some ways of speaking are the same” (1974, p.201). Ways of speaking imply knowledge not only of forms and their co-occurrence, but also their social distribution and appropriacy for social function. The uniformity problem thus shifts focus from linguistic production to community-based interpretation.

There are obvious links to Labov’s conception (1966), perhaps the first to couple productive and evaluative norms. Both place value on describing normative behavior, as displayed consciously and unconsciously by speakers. It has proven more difficult to grasp how norms develop and change, are acquired and understood – but this is a question which interaction-based analysis must also answer. Language socialization theory (Ochs 1996) addresses this, and practice theorists (Eckert 2000, Meyerhoff 2001) have begun to explore it, both from anthropological traditions. More sociologically-inclined adherents of network theory, such as the Milroys, say little about local norms at this level, despite crucial contributions to modelling networks as channels for linguistic change (often styled ‘mechanisms’ for norm enforcement) and “prerequisite[s] for a focused set of distinctive vernacular norms” (1998, p.188). Their point that networks are a neutral, relative structural concept (p.193) indicates the need for companion studies of linguistic ideology to explore the values being transmitted across weak or strong ties.

Hymes’s model supports multiple varieties, like Gumperz’s, and insists on shared form in addition to shared ways of speaking, unlike many later definitions privileging the latter (Romaine 1994, p.22;

Fasold 1990, p.41; Trask 1997, p.204). That the two may diverge is usefully captured in the *Sprachbund/Sprechbund* distinction (Neustupný 1978) – areal terms defined on just these grounds – but a SpCom must be located in the union of the two (Hymes 1974, p.50, gives a more precise account). Orientation to linguistic uniformity is often a dividing line for theorists: where later Gumperz downplays it, radical subjectivists deny it (Corder 1973, Hudson 1996), and variationists privilege it (Labov’s “uniform structural base” 1989 p.2, Kerswill 1994, Kroch 1996). Hymes, like Labov, holds a nuanced view interpreting uniformity as an abstract regularity, not equivalent to identity of forms. Recognizing that language use may constitute social relationships, he suggests that a scale of distinctiveness be left open: “Part of the creativity of users of language lies in the freedom to determine what and how much linguistic difference matters” (1974, p.123) to boundary maintenance.

William Labov’s SpCom conception has been enormously influential. It is more empirically-rooted, less generalized, than Hymes’s or Gumperz’s. It emerges in the course of a well-defined program of research on language structure and change, rather than in the context of sociolinguistic theorizing. Consider three aspects. 1) It is closely based on results from a series of urban studies which established goals for later researchers; its outlines emerge from a particular set of questions and answers, and may be inappropriate for others. 2) More than other theorists, Labov makes explicit and testable his conceptions of linguistic uniformity and normative sociolinguistic structure, which

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have been widely adopted and debated. 3) It is allied to a rich array of methods, also commonly used – often by researchers with diverging assumptions and objectives.

Labov's definition was the first to posit both shared norms and linguistic uniformity (as structured variation), in that order, as criteria for identifying a SpCom. While Romaine and others incorrectly charged that in Labov's conception of uniformity, SpCom members "share rules of grammar in the form of variable rules" (1982, p.19), the variable rule (Labov 1969) is not his solution to the problem. (Romaine herself admits it is peripheral to the SpCom: "the thrust of my argument is against the specific descriptive device, the variable rule", 1982, p.23; but the misunderstanding persists, e.g. Kerswill 1994, p.137.) Instead this is handled through the earlier invention of the linguistic variable (Labov 1966, pp.32ff), a set of variants which is specifiable independent of any predictability by linguistic conditioning, and capable of crossing phonemic or morphemic lines. The normal heterogeneity characteristic of speech production is expressed as differential use of variants, but the SpCom is "defined on the level of interpretation; the obverse of heterogeneous speech production is homogeneity in the interpretation of the variants" (1982, p.18). Thus uniformity and interpretation are inseparable.

Subsequently, the importance of linguistic uniformity for Labov is highlighted: matching the complex distribution of short-a in Philadelphia (1989) is *prima facie* evidence for membership. But it is the normative criterion that has vexed critics. Since many later

considerations focus on the 1963–4 New York City study as though representative of current Labovian practice, discussion of his contribution to the SpCom also concentrates here. It must be borne in mind however that what Labov prescribed were analytical and interpretive practices – not outcomes, in the sense that subsequent speech communities should resemble New York’s.

Labov’s SpCom model is the direct product of his (1966) survey of the Lower East Side (LES) neighborhood of New York City. Here the SpCom definition was developed; from here it was generalized, by Labov and others. This study’s goal was “to investigate the structure of NYC English” (p.110). Understanding the social distribution of linguistic forms, and exploring their social meaning – the correlation and indexicality problems which constitute dominant interests in sociolinguistics today – proved necessary, but subsidiary. Many later criticisms of the SpCom come from researchers primarily concerned with these issues, especially indexing (e.g. Eckert), or even with no interest in linguistic structure (e.g. Bucholtz).

For Labov, the constituency of a SpCom must be discovered through the research process. It is an outcome, not an assumption; a matter for observation, not theory (1994, pp.4–5). He breaks cleanly with classic definitions that endow a group of speakers with social coherence, warning sociolinguists to “avoid any error which would arise in assuming that a group of people who speak alike is a fundamental unit of social behavior”, on the grounds that “asking about the language characteristics of a social group... seems more

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fundamental and more closely tied to the genesis of linguistic differentiation” (1966, 136–37).

This approach avoids circularity on the assumption, shared with Hymes, that social units can be clearly identified on nonlinguistic criteria – a point challenged explicitly by Gumperz, who considered that both social and linguistic categories are “signalled and subject to change in response to similar forces”, asking “How can one set of categories be used to establish an objective basis against which to evaluate the other?” (1982, p.29). It is therefore critical that Labov not focus (as he does not) on how language as a semiotic resource is manipulated to constitute social identity.

Labov’s method in New York was to delimit a sample first by applying social criteria, then by raising issues of competence via acquisition patterns (excluding non-native speakers of English, and of NYC English), and finally by analysis of linguistic structure (e.g. the ultimate separation of African American speakers on phonological grounds). The notion of community guiding the LES survey was primarily defined not by interaction, shared norms, or social stratification, but residence. The LES was selected because (1) the city’s main social classes and ethnic groups were well represented, (2) it was a focus for both social mobility and local loyalty, (3) as a former port of entry the influence of immigrant groups could be tested, and (4) residential structure was typical of the city and allowed for interaction between social groups. There was no requirement of strong

social bonds or coherence (even his 1989 definition begins “an aggregate of speakers”, p.2). No linguistic criteria were applied.

As the emphasis was on results of dialect acquisition, convergence, focusing and transmission, interaction was important for the resulting system’s nature. Yet Labov’s interest was not in the diversity of speechways produced by interaction within particular networks (like Gumperz), but rather the consequent uniformity across a larger collectivity. New York City turned out to show a surprising degree of convergent behavior, reflected in Labov’s statement: “NYC is a single speech community, united by a common set of evaluative norms, though divergent in the application of these norms” (1966, p.355; note however the last clause).

This normative regularity is an empirical finding. The claim rests primarily on the evidence of synchronic style–shifting patterns, supported by covert and overt measures of evaluative norms (subjective–reaction, self–evaluation, and linguistic–insecurity tests, plus language–attitude interviews). Results recurred strikingly across social classes, the sexes, age– and ethnic–groups; irregularities were minor, largely mirroring changes in progress or contrasting changes of different age. The tests were conceived and interpreted in the light of a model of social stratification which has been much criticized (discussed below). Only the subjective reaction test implicated such a model in its administration, however, and the overall convergence of Labov’s findings has never been challenged (Santa Ana & Parodí 1998).

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The character of this specific case undergirds the general definition of the SpCom in his later synthesis (1972, p.120–121):

“The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms. These norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage.”

Several points require emphasis because of frequent misinterpretations. The norms are not limited to evaluation or ideology (contra Fasold 1984, p.148; Bucholtz 1999, p.208), but include quantitative patterns of production showing structured variation. Generalizations about such norms are thus not merely interpretive statements filtered through the analyst’s preferred model of society. Labov’s first assertion that “New York forms a single speech community” occurs (1966, p.202) before evaluative data have even been introduced.

Crucially, Labov’s conception requires reference to a set of shared norms – not deference, or uniform adherence. He repeatedly describes departures from the overall patterns, by individuals and subgroups, which do not falsify the existence of these norms. This is consistent with the definition given above, allowing for ‘divergence in application’.

It has been charged that Labov’s model specifies rigid allegiance to sociolinguistic norms. Milroy wonders, “Why should we suppose that individuals at different social levels make the same social

evaluations...?” (1982, p.46). Kerswill suggests “Labov’s model... seems blindly consensus-based and does not allow for multiple norms” (1994, p.27). Bucholtz refers to “the expectation of consensus in SpCom norms” as “the problem of homogeneity in the SpCom model” (1999, p.209), brashly conflating Labov’s conception with that of Bloomfield and Hymes. Milroy & Milroy attribute to Labov the claim that “every speaker agrees on the evaluation of the varying norms of language” (1997, p.53). Milroy even argues that given “the doctrine of common evaluation... it is difficult to see how socially motivated linguistic change can take place” (1982, p.38). The word “consensus” reverberates across these analyses, which unconsciously echo the variationist critique of categorical structuralist linguistics (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog, 1968).

These criticisms, however, fail to distinguish the analyst’s view of social structure from generalizations about dominant sociolinguistic patterns of production and evaluation. (Labov 1966 clearly separates, and non-circularly orders, the two.) Though framed as objections to the SpCom model, they are actually objections to the ‘consensus’ view of society the LES study adopted. They also appear to suggest that surveys following Labovian methods lead, through expectations and prejudgments, to predetermined results. Thus they not only make a mild, plausible claim – that the consensual sociolinguistic patterns found in 1960s NYC are a narrow basis for a general SpCom model – but a more serious one: that Labov’s social-theory assumptions led to

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wrong conclusions about NYC speech, and generally render his model inadequate.

Yet no evidence for exceptionless norms exists in the LES survey itself. Labov repeatedly noted divergence, both in production and evaluation. A striking individual example is Steve K, who “consciously tried to reverse his college-trained tendency towards formal speech, and... deliberately rejected the pattern of values reflected” in the speech of other LES individuals (1966, p.80). Despite this rejection, Steve K was unable to significantly differentiate himself in test speech. The method clearly does not preclude opposing values, then; in NYC they simply appeared to be exceptional, or to have insignificant consequences for speech production. This underlies Labov’s dual stress on evaluative behavior and patterns of variation: attitude differences unaccompanied by speech differences are epiphenomena.

When a significant group of speakers differs on both levels, however, the model treats them as a distinct speech community. This is the case of the African Americans examined separately: “Negro speakers share the white attitudes towards correctness... [but] reverse white attitudes towards the cultural values of NYC speech” (p.352). “The use of (eh), (oh), (ay) and (aw) by Negro speakers is quite different than for whites” (p.370). Differences of class and age among black speakers are noted, too, but overall they are consistently distinguished on many grounds from the white ethnic groups, who pattern together. Again, Labov noted “the resistance of children to the middle-class norm” (p.348), and argued (p.351) that

“many lower class subjects fall outside the influence of the unifying norms... many seem to lack the cultural values which maintain the working class pattern of speech in opposition to massive pressure from above”

On close examination, it is clear that this seminal study, like many subsequent ones influenced by it, recognized rather than suppressed diverse patterns of evaluation and production in the community examined. The thrust of Labov’s “unifying norm” was not to paint, or prescribe, uniformity, but to stress the pressure of standard linguistic norms that were accepted more than resisted. It is true that Labov does not formally raise the resistance observed to the level of competing norms and reify it in a ‘conflict’ model; neither is it obvious that this would be a correct analysis of his data. Finally, the study identified several levels of generalization – local unity, patterns of divergence that nevertheless refer to local norms, and shared acceptance of external norms by members of different SpComs (black and white New Yorkers) – pointing to the need for a ‘nested’ SpCom model.

The speech community and models of society

To the extent that the normative organization of a SpCom is discovered through empirical research, it can clearly be distinguished from the socio-economic structure of the society to which that SpCom belongs. Standard procedure in sociolinguistic surveys requires consulting existing social science and historical research to

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understand the makeup of a community, and inform the use of social variables as explanatory factors for language variation and change.

In this approach, analyses of social structure and linguistic behavior must be kept separate so the former may have explanatory value for the latter: “The nature of these [speech] norms, especially whether they relate to standard, legitimized, and literate forms of language, is determined by larger socio-economic structures, in particular those based on power” (Kerswill 1994, p.27). As noted, Gumperz’s challenge to this results in an opposed set of research concerns, called ‘interpretive sociolinguistics’ by LePage: “work which starts from the observation of linguistic behavior and interprets it in terms of social meaning, rather than starting from social structure and looking for linguistic correlates” (1997, p.31).

Recently it has been argued within the correlational paradigm, as well, that the two levels cannot be separated. To the Milroys, “Labov’s key sociolinguistic notion of speech community... seems to assume a consensus model of social class whereby the community is fundamentally cohesive,” while applying such a model to the speakers they studied requires analysing the Belfast vernacular “as an unsuccessful approximation to educated... or standard English varieties” (1998, pp.180–181). Yet if “vernacular maintenance can result in conflict between two opposing norms”, one standard and one low-prestige, then vernacular speakers do not share a common set of (evaluative) norms with standard speakers: “The pattern arising is... one of conflict rather than consensus” (1997, p.53). (Here they follow

Rickford 1986, for a Guyanese Creole-speaking community where opposed sets of attitudes aligned with distinct patterns of variation.) They argue that “a social class model based on conflict, division and inequality can account better than one based on consensus for many patterns of language variation” (1998, p.181).

The latter point is persuasive; but the isomorphy proposed for the two levels of social organization is not. The type of evidence cited from Belfast to support the Milroy’s view is also found in NYC, as shown above, if to different degree. Yet neither conflict nor consensus models can be preferred in the abstract; as social analyses they are more or less applicable in specific situations. Choice is related to scale factors: higher points on the population scale may be more heterogeneous and divided. Delimitation of SpCom boundaries is also critical. In Dorian (1981), focus on the competence of Gaelic-speaking fisherfolk alone lends itself to a consensus model, while including the attitudes of English monolinguals in the same villages might better be handled in a conflict approach. In NYC, Labov’s exclusion of certain native and immigrant groups is related to his concentration on the linguistic system. The legitimacy of analytical choices thus depends upon selection of the research question, in addition to the site.

If such models are intended to help elucidate sociolinguistic patterns, they must be defined independently. An approach should be adopted not due to results of subjective-evaluation or matched-guise tests, but because broader patterns of social, economic, historical and cultural organization make it compelling. To contend that conflict

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models are generally preferable because of sociolinguistic findings, and then use the former to interpret the latter, is circular. Further, the claim that a social model binds the linguist to a particular view of the varieties under study – that under a consensus model, New Yorkers must fail in speaking standard English, while in a conflict model they successfully maintain a low-prestige variety – is simply false. It does not reflect usual practice among sociolinguists: recognizing the hegemonic character of standard languages, while considering structurally distinct varieties to have their own integrity.

The introduction of conflict models has benefited correlational studies in several ways. It draws attention to the choices open to analysts, and their impact. It raises the question, Does recognition of competing norms within a SpCom invalidate emphasis on overarching norms as a definitional criterion? Undoubtedly, conflict models suit some social situations better (e.g., post-plantation Caribbean societies with characteristically strong racial and class antagonisms).

They are not panaceas, however, to be universally preferred. They carry no explanations with them – but there are caveats. It is easily overlooked that in the absence of broad societal consensus on values, stratification may still be powerful. Conflict analysts (Rickford, 1986; the Milroys, 1998) typically assign opposed groups each to a set of normative values, so that discord occurs between relatively homogeneous factions. Reality is often more complicated, with individuals holding conflicting values, each ratified by society (Patrick

1999); but individual agency is not easily captured in theories derived from Marx.

Finally, the connection between models of society and characterizations of the SpCom is not transparent, despite claims in the literature. Interpreting SpCom models primarily through the lens of social class is unnecessarily restrictive. Whether one privileges structural uniformity and stresses the institutionalization of power in shared attitudes towards a standard (regarding dissent as minimal and covert) – or privileges acts of identity and focuses on speaker agency in social positioning through linguistic choice, celebrating diverse attitudes – are to some extent predilections of the analyst that do not invalidate competent description and theorizing.

Other developments to the speech community concept

The principal concepts of SpCom have received reactions and modifications of two broad types: variations on a theme, intended to refine (usually broaden) a SpCom model; and general rejection of their applicability, on various grounds.

An important trend among the latter is the rise of radical subjectivist approaches, influenced by the work of Robert LePage, especially his ‘acts of identity’ model (LePage & Tabouret-Keller 1985). LePage’s principal theoretical concern is to reject the privileging of language as an abstract object of investigation and substitute a speaker-based model, building up both notions of linguistic system and sociolinguistic patterns from individual data – especially

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perceptions and motivations. LePage's emphasis on diversity of speaker orientations and fluidity of linguistic boundaries is driven by the challenges of 'Caribbean sociolinguistic complexes' (Carrington 1993, Winford 1988). LePage and Tabouret-Keller are interested in understanding how "individuals... can be considered members of linguistic communities" (1985, p.158), but fall short of modelling this.

Subjectivist positions postdate Labov's and Gumperz's introduction of shared social norms as a criterion, but stress individual perception of norms to the exclusion of other elements. Corder, considering second language learners, defines a SpCom as "made up of individuals who regard themselves as speaking the same language; it need have no other defining attributes" (1973, p.53). Hudson carries this emphasis on individual perception to a logical extreme, claiming that "Our sociolinguistic world is not organised in terms of objective 'speech communities' " (1996, p.29), and that sociolinguistics should stick to "the micro level of the individual person and the individual linguistic item" (p.229). Such radical positions are in sympathy with 'interpretive sociolinguistics' but problematic for efforts to describe linguistic systems – or language change, where many structural developments are "quite removed from social affect or recognition" (Labov 1982, p.84).

The issue of determining membership versus lesser degrees of participation is highlighted by Dorian's (1982) study of Gaelic 'semi-speakers'. Here it is not extension beyond traditional bounds (LePage; Rampton 1995) but contraction within them that is problematic. Low-

proficiency Gaelic semi-speakers do not adequately possess productive competence in the variety; may not be significantly differentiated from monolingual English-speakers in terms of their language use; and are insensitive to normative judgments of usage. On the other hand, they display strong receptive competence and knowledge of norms of appropriateness, and may be self- and other-identified as Gaelic bilinguals. Gaelic speakers are strikingly aware of regional, and unaware of social, variation, so that the latter Labovian criterion is irrelevant. While Dorian thus finds Labov's definition unsuitable to include semi-speakers, and prefers Hymes's, Labov himself (1982, p.50) notes that this situation carries heterogeneity of production and homogeneity of norms to a logical extreme.

The notion of simultaneous membership in multiple overlapping SpComs - alongside membership in distinct ones - is first posed in a Hymesian framework (Saville-Troike 1982). It leads directly to the conclusion that "there is no limit to the number and variety of SpComs that are to be found in a society" (Bolinger 1975, p.333). But this same position may be reached without loosening the notion of SpCom to 'personal network', simply by taking seriously the requirement for explicitly multi-variety situations, since there is no principled limit to language/dialect contact and creation. As this conclusion appears unavoidable, what is needed is not a wholesale retreat from the notion of coherent communities, but a conception which makes possible the integration of complex patterns of membership. Whether the top-down approach of Labov or the bottom-up one of Gumperz and

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LePage is selected as a starting-point, a comprehensive SpCom model must allow intermediate structures: in the first case, nesting, and in the second, overlapping. Since the latter seem to be untheorized – speaker- and interaction-based theories have yet to reach above the level of networks – I consider only nested models below.

Scale, interpreted demographically, has been little investigated in linguistics (on diffusion see Trudgill 1974, Callary 1975, Labov 1982). Romaine gives five levels of abstraction in linguistic analysis: “individual – network – social group – speech community – language” (1982, p.8). Considering a different list (individual speakers, dyads, multi-party face-to-face interactions, communities of practice and large communities), Hanks concludes that

“No single metalanguage for participant roles will be adequate at all levels... We can hope to cast our descriptions of face-to-face participation and larger-scale discursive formations in such a way that they intersect – or if not, that the points of divergence are made visible.” (1996, p.223)

Such scales are not unidimensional – networks, as asynchronous assemblages, involve interaction at several levels – but concentric mappings occur. In practice, applications of the SpCom are scattered across higher levels, and cannot be restricted to one point. It has a lower bound (it has been used for a single longhouse of two nuclear families, Jackson 1974), but cannot be distinguished in principle from networks, which are themselves potentially unbounded upwards.

SpCom is a multi-levelled concept cutting across the ecology of nested contexts.

Kerswill's (1994) study of rural migrants to Bergen requires a focus on the integration of nested contexts. He spells out the monolingual character of Labov's SpCom model, arguing that as urban natives and migrants are groups at the same level of social organization, a higher level is required to understand the social evaluation and symbolic functions of locally competing varieties. In this model groups exhibiting internally coherent patterns of production and evaluation, but contrasting with their neighbors, can still be united in a 'larger' SpCom if they can be systematically related. Stril migrants form a linguistically heterogeneous group speaking regionally differentiated varieties (p.37). They acquire a low-prestige Bergen feature, schwa-lowering, but accord it high prestige among themselves; which Kerswill explicates in terms of distinct symbolic functions in migrant and dominant communities. Building on this line, simultaneous membership of distinct SpComs can be modelled so long as they are systematically relatable (though, Kerswill admits, non-nested overlapping memberships remain problematic).

Santa Ana & Parodí (1998) also work to expand Labov's concept into a general typology. In a study of Spanish dialect contact in Mexico, they discovered that a subset of community members speaking a regional vernacular – not distinguishable linguistically by separate features, or socially by age, region, family or similar descriptors – appear unaware of the social evaluation of locally

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stigmatized markers. Other degrees of awareness of regional and national/standard linguistic variables are distinguished. Recognition, evaluation and production of socially marked features form the basis of a four-field typology of SpCom configurations; fields are analytically distinct, but (like Kerswill) systematically relatable. Membership in a field is a measure of social influence from the wider society on an individual speaker, and appears to correspond to “the extent of the effective social network... [and] the size of the economic market in which they actively participate” (p.38).

In preserving the primacy of shared evaluation, but also common patterns of linguistic variation, as criteria – and not utilizing self-identification or social functions of language – this is an explicitly Labovian model. It is presently monolingual, though a bilingual extension is contemplated; empirically derived, but intended for taxonomy and predicated on careful review of existing work. It is not interactional in its definition, but its explanation is linked to social network theory; it is aimed at the correlation problem, but a bottom-up process identifying units of the size and type required for studying indexicality as well. As with Kerswill, issues of scale are implied, and it appears to account well for the nested, non-overlapping relations described. It has not yet been applied to more complex situations involving dual membership or individual responses to conflicting norms.

This review of the SpCom suggests several generalizations. Work required of the concept ideally includes at least: application to the

correlation problem, and appropriate interfacing with indexicality; handling multivariety situations; allowing for nested communities, and articulating with issues of scale; realistically addressing linguistic uniformity in the light of structured variation; specifying relevant types of sociolinguistic evaluation, and the minimum degree to which they must be shared; systematic relation of communities in contact on the latter two criteria; application to a wide range of competences; recognition of conflicting norms held by individuals or within groups; and attention to processes of conventionalization, as well as their normative results. In some cases, work must be shared with concepts like social network (Milroy 2001) or community of practice (Meyerhoff 2001).

The SpCom ought to abjure certain kinds of work, too. Users should not presume social cohesion, or accept it to be an inevitable result of interaction; size and its effects should not be taken for granted; social theories, including class analyses, must be explicitly invoked, not accepted as freight; the SpCom should not be taken for a unit of social analysis; and we ought not to assume SpComs exist as predefined entities waiting to be researched, or identify them with folk notions, but see them as objects constituted anew by the researcher's gaze and the questions we ask. Finally, the job of proper SpCom taxonomy, fitting case studies to typology and refining the latter, awaits.

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